DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 383 061 EA 026 712

TITLE	A Guide for 21st Century School Councils.
INSTITUTION	Lane Education Service District, Eugene, OR. Oregon Professional Development Center.
PUB DATE	Feb 95
NOTE	21p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Oregon Professional Development Center, P.O. Box 2680, Eugene, OR 97402.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; *Governing Boards; Participative Decision Making; Policy Formation; *School Based Management; *School Restructuring
IDENTIFIERS	*Oregon; *Oregon Education for the 21st Century 1991

ABSTRACT

This guidebook was designed to help educational practitioners and community members in Oregon understand the issues regarding school-council formation and development. In 1991 the Oregon State Legislature passed the Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century, mandating a fundamental change in public education. The Act assigns school councils the primary responsibility for developing and implementing the key components of Oregon's school-reform effort in each school building. The first section describes the legislative basis for school councils. Section 2 presents rules for school-council membership. The third section describes the six stages of school-council development--readiness and preparation; formation; group process and decision-making development; mission, vision, and action plan; transition; and institutionalization. Effective school councils are characterized by the following: (1) the recognition that council development is a time-consuming and continuous process; (2) clearly defined leadership roles; (3) the use of trained and neutral facilitators; (4) clear communication channels within and among participants; and (5) preparation for major systemic change. (LMI)

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A GUIDE FOR 21ST CENTURY SCHOOL COUNCILS

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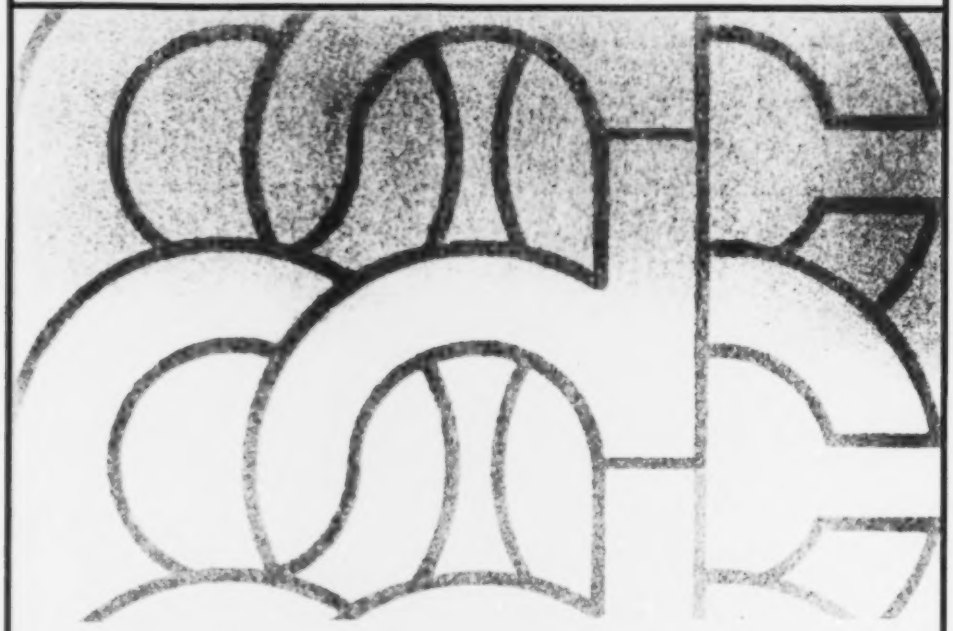

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OREGON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CENTER

A Guide for 21st Century School Councils

PARTNERS IN SERVICE TO OREGON SCHOOLS

I. Introduction

The Oregon Professional Development Center (OPDC) is funded by the Oregon Department of Education to provide assistance for the initiation and development of 21st Century School Councils. OPDC provides information, training, and technical assistance regarding school councils in accordance with the *Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century.*

This ***Guide for 21st Century School Councils*** is designed to help educational practitioners and community members understand the important issues regarding school council formation and development. It is our strong belief that councils that follow the processes described in this ***Guide*** will be more likely to experience success in reaching their goal to improve student performance.

Legislative Basis for School Councils

In 1991 the Oregon State Legislature passed the *Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century* mandating a fundamental change in public education throughout the state. Among its many components, the *Oregon Educational Act* requires that school districts:

- Establish school councils to plan and implement the elements of the act at the building level.
- Explore the development of mixed-age grouped primary classrooms.
- Offer certificates of initial and advanced mastery based on performance assessment.
- Establish alternative learning environments for students who leave school or fail to make satisfactory progress.
- Extend the school year to 220 days by the year 2010.

The *Oregon Educational Act* assigns school councils the primary responsibility for developing and implementing the key aspects of Oregon's school reform effort in each school building throughout the state. Individual school councils must provide the following:

- "The development and implementation of a plan to improve the professional growth and career opportunities of a school's faculty and staff.
- The improvement of its instructional program.
- The development and coordination of the implementation of this 1991 Act at the school site." [Oregon State. HB 3565, (1992) The *Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century*.]

Each school district is charged with establishing a school council within each building by September 1995.

II. School Council Membership

According to the 1991 legislation, school councils should be composed of teachers, classified district employees, building administrators and parents of students. The building principal or his/her designee is automatically a member. Teachers must comprise a majority on each council, with selection of teachers and classified members through a direct election by their peers. Parent representatives should be selected by the council, and additional community members and students may be added at the council's discretion.

The size of school councils can vary from as few as seven members to more than twenty. Small schools with too few staff can apply for a membership requirement waiver from the Oregon Department of Education.

SCHOOL COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP	
Size	7 - 20+ members Small schools may petition for waiver
Principal or Designee	Automatically a member
Teachers	Must be majority of council membership Elected by peers
Classified Staff	Elected by peers
Parents	Selected by council
Students	Optional, selected by council
Community Members	Optional, selected by council

III. School Council Development

There are six major components in the development of school councils. In *1: Readiness and Preparation*, district and building policies and support mechanisms are reviewed, strengthened or augmented to support school council work. In *2: Council Formation*, members' roles and relationships are clarified and communicated clearly. In *3: Group Process and Decision-Making Development*, councils set working agreements and learn to work together in a team. In *4: Mission, Vision and Action Plan*, the group focuses on what it wants to accomplish and how those goals fit with district policies and state requirements. In *5: Transition*, the role of the council itself may change as the group shares responsibility for decision making with school leaders. Finally, in *6: Institutionalization*, the council takes on an accepted leadership role within the school.

1: Readiness and Preparation

Before school councils are formed and charged with implementing the requirements of the *Oregon Educational Act*, district and building policies and other support mechanisms should be in place to assure successful council start-up and operation. Establishing these supportive documents at the beginning can often avoid later misunderstandings and unproductive work efforts. These documents should be maintained to reflect current priorities and should be periodically reviewed and amended as necessary.

One of the first tasks should be the development of district policy and administrative regulations concerning the role and scope of school council work. The overall policy should recognize the broad decision-making role of

school councils as established by legislation. More easily modified administrative regulations should include:

- Functions, roles and relationships among the school board, district office and individual school councils.
- Strategies for effective collaboration and communication between the board, school district office, and the school council. The view of school councils as a resource should lead to a specific commitment to fund the ongoing training of council members. District support for school councils recognizes that councils will need access to continuous development because of changing functions and the periodic addition of new members.

2: Formation

A quality formation effort insures that school council start-up is smooth, that members work well together, and that functions and roles are clearly understood by council members and constituents. Many problems can develop when school councils do not take the time to clarify and communicate their roles and relationships.

Council members need a thorough grounding in the Oregon school reform legislation in conjunction with established district policies, administrative regulations, and contractual agreements. These laws, policies, regulations, and agreements provide the context within which clear roles and responsibilities must be developed.

Usually school councils will select individual members to serve as chair, facilitator, and recorder. Basically, the chair is responsible for setting the meeting agenda and designing the meeting, the facilitator acts to keep the

meeting flowing, and the recorder is responsible for summarizing and writing up key discussion, decision, and future agenda items.

Many councils have benefited from appointing an "outside" or "neutral" facilitator. Such a person can maintain a detached perspective and concentrate solely on helping the council with its process. Specifically, good facilitators are skilled at summarizing, reading a group, helping a group which has stalled, resolving conflicts, and employing various group decision-making techniques. Counselors, staff members not on the council, and community members can be trained to serve this function well.

The structure of the school council's communication process with constituents should be open and provide equal access. Meetings should be held in a place which invites attendance by non-council members, and meeting agendas and minutes should be widely distributed. In some school councils, representatives are assigned certain constituents to report to and solicit feedback from between meetings.

Specific communication processes can also be established with the school board, district office, and community groups. The important element is to insure that all constituents have open access to council members and input into decisions. While council responsibilities can seem daunting to members, many tasks and responsibilities can involve non-council staff and community participants working in task teams with the council serving as coordinator of these activities.

3. Group Process and Decision-Making Development

As school councils form and begin to work together, it may be useful to members or those observing them to

understand that groups follow a normal pattern of growth. This pattern includes the following stages:

- *Forming:* Group members work to understand their role, their relationships to one another, the purpose of the group, and the role of the group in relation to the larger organization.
- *Storming:* Group members experience conflict in response to a realization concerning the difficulty of the task ahead and their lack of clarity about leadership roles and decision-making processes.
- *Norming:* Group members develop cohesion, respect each other's abilities, and share a common belief in the competence of the group to accomplish its mission.
- *Performing:* Group members are satisfied and effective in moving forward with tangible accomplishments that advance the group's agenda.

[Tuchman, Bruce W. "Development Sequence in Small Groups." (1965) *Psychological Bulletin*.]

Team building should be continuous and viewed as fundamental to group process. As the group begins to work together, school council members will find that time spent getting to know one another and strengthening their working relationships will be well spent. When their work becomes more complex, they will have well-established working relationships to rely on. There are a variety of team- and trust-building exercises that can be employed to assist with this process.

Councils need to establish group agreements or guidelines. These consist of the basic rules of procedural and interpersonal conduct that each council member agrees to abide by. One agreement, for example, might be that issues requiring a decision be discussed more than once and then decided at a later meeting. Such agreements

have the effect of providing a council with a framework that can be used to keep the meetings flowing and help insure the integrity of the process.

Regular evaluation is also effective. At the end of each meeting, for example, council members might discuss what went well and what should change. This provides an ongoing opportunity to improve the process and content of meetings.

A clear decision-making process is also important. Council members need to understand how decisions will be made. Most councils utilize some form of consensus process for key decisions, but may also want to use polling or another decision-making form for other items. A school council should match the decision process to the type of issue to be resolved.

4: Mission, Vision and Action Plan

In one of their first tasks, school council members need to develop a mission statement explaining the council's overall purpose. A mission statement should be developed through an active process with the entire school staff and community representatives. The process of developing a mission statement will help council members form a unified understanding of their purpose. Revisiting and updating the mission statement should be done periodically even for established teams.

The shared vision is basically what the school will look like if council efforts are successful. The council should align itself with the direction of the school district by creating its version of the district's vision.

An action plan is a more detailed explanation of the steps the council needs to go through to achieve its vision. It is advisable for councils to develop a plan which defines more achievable objectives in its earlier phases and sets a later timetable for more complex ones. This will enable the council to develop and maintain a record of achievement.

5: Transition

Transition involves the capacity of school personnel and school council members to adapt to changing leadership patterns and operate in a modality of shared responsibility for decision making. Following the formation work of deciding how to function and what to do, councils may experience difficulty because their work takes them into areas that were once the exclusive territory of school boards, district offices, principals or department chairs. In council meetings, the classified employees, parents, and community participants may not be accustomed to operating on an equal basis with teachers and administrators or may not be treated equally.

Councils should strive to assure that the contributions of all members are valued. One aspect of the transition process has to do with assisting people with their changing roles. Our recommendation is that specific training be provided to help administrative personnel learn effective ways of working with school councils and leading work teams. In its reliance on shared decision making, Oregon school reform underscores the importance of these learnings.

Teachers, classified employees, and community members may also require new leadership skills to adapt to the demands of participation on school councils. The *Oregon Educational Act* requires majority teacher membership on school councils, placing strong emphasis on teacher leadership in designing and implementing extensive curricular changes. These responsibilities for collaboration with peers and others call for new skills for many teachers. The role of classified and community members is similarly challenging.

Including constituents in activitie is also critical to the school council's decision-making role. It is important that the school council recognize the interest groups within its school system and build in productive ways to engage those groups as part of the ongoing decision-making process. Use of cross-functional teams that involve key school and community members will help insure that the ideas of constituents are considered. For example, councils might assign various aspects of work to non-members such as researching a particular issue.

School councils might also want to build in deliberate checks to steer the process as a decision moves forward. This can be accomplished by sending out a survey asking for input, polling key constituents concerning their opinion of council options, or by holding an open forum to discuss a proposed course of action.

Part of the ongoing transition process of every school council is the need to do new member training. In most cases, new members will be added on a yearly basis. There will be an annual need to revisit the formation issues presented above and provide training to insure that new members understand their roles, participate in a review

of group agreements, and are integrated as part of the group. One suggestion for helping new members feel comfortable is to assign each of them a mentor. The chair and facilitator can actively encourage and support new member participation during council meetings.

6: Institutionalization

Institutionalization occurs when the school council becomes an accepted, trusted decision-making entity and assumes a leadership role within a school. At this point, the work of the council is focused on school improvement planning, staff development, and the implementation and evaluation of reform efforts. These work efforts are more technical in nature and include building an effective ongoing planning process, understanding specific reform requirements, establishing and using data systems for decision making, designing effective implementation strategies, and developing effective evaluation procedures for assessing council efforts.

III. Effective School Councils

Staff from the Oregon Professional Development Center have worked with schools throughout the state and have identified key areas where understanding the conditions, operations and impact of school council efforts can support their effectiveness.

1. Council development is a continuous process.

School council development is continuous. The legislation itself and the accompanying timelines for implementation dictate that council members need ongoing training in understanding the expectations for their work. Further, as councils add new members or new tasks, members may well revisit stages of development previously experienced. For example, the addition of new members may return a council to the formation stage, which may require activities that help new members feel included and clear about their roles. Also, resolving one set of council issues or problems often uncovers new, more complicated issues that must be addressed. The trick is to resolve each issue at a higher level on the road to successful school improvement.

2. The leadership roles of principal, superintendent, central office administrators, and school board must be clearly defined and redefined in relation to the changing activities of School Councils.

School councils create a need for school boards, superintendents, central office administrators, and principals to examine their roles in relation to this new entity. There may be need for new policies and procedures to create cooperative activity or to avoid duplication of effort.

Principals should broaden their leadership styles to include a role which makes them a "leader of teams." The effective administrator has a clear understanding of legislative reform; can lead work teams; and understands the principles of meeting management, conflict resolution, and group facilitation.

Within buildings there is a need to achieve clarity with school councils as to which school activities are management related and which require collaboration with the council. Our experience is that while time in the beginning is well spent defining and clarifying parameters, the concern about parameters often disappears once a council begins to function.

3. *The use of trained and neutral facilitators greatly increases the functioning of school councils.*

Since its inception in 1992, the OPDC has provided on-site consultants to many school councils throughout Oregon. We believe schools that utilize neutral trained facilitators to guide their process make more progress and have more satisfied group members than those that do not. It is more advantageous for council members not to simultaneously assume the role of a council member and the role of council facilitator.

4. *Clear school council communication channels within a building, between buildings, with the district office and with the local community are key to success.*

School councils are most effective when they establish clear and effective communication procedures with their constituents. Councils must develop effective ways to reach out to the diverse communities which make up a school

and community and incorporate them in their deliberations. The implementation of clear processes involving a wide audience prior to a final decision can save school councils from much animosity and misunderstanding. We recommend councils refer to our publication, *A Guide for School Councils and Minority Communities*.

5. Significant change takes time.

The very nature of educational reform calls for people to take on new roles. While necessary, these changes can be inherently uncomfortable and often result in avoidance behaviors by many of those affected. Council work is often impeded and even redirected because of this. Fostering discussion about school reform, providing accurate information, breaking down the big steps into manageable pieces, and taking time to celebrate accomplishments are things that school councils can do to help people see value in the changes required and accomplish effective school improvement.

6. The emergence of school councils leads to major systems change within school districts.

Once a school council is formed, immediate questions are raised about its role and relationship to traditional formal school leadership, to non-member staff, to the community, and to the board and district office. These relationships must be carefully explored, defined, and developed to improve operational clarity and confidence in the governance system of a school and district.

Summary of School Council Components

1: Readiness and Preparation	District policy and regulations about role and scope of **council** work Commitment to fund ongoing training of **council** members
2: Formation	Members grounded in legislation, policies, regulations, contractual agreements Select chair, facilitator, recorder Create constituent communication processes
3: Group Process and Decision-Making Development	Normal group pattern of development: forming, storming, norming, performing Team building Group agreements and guidelines Regular evaluation Clear decision-making processes
4: Mission, Vision, Action Plan	Overall purpose Effects of successful efforts Steps to achieve vision
5: Transition	Changing leadership patterns New leadership skills Including constituents Regular, deliberate checks New member training
6: Institutional-ization	Council assumes leadership role

For further information on **school council** issues or on OPDC services, please call:

1-800-358-2486 or **503-461-8201**
Oregon Professional Development Center
P. O. Box 2680
Eugene, OR 97402
FAX (503) 461-8297

Companion OPDC Publications Include:

- ***Guide to Profitable Visitations*** to assist schools in planning successful school visits and to prepare schools to host such visits.
- ***A Guide for School Councils and Minority Communities*** to assist **school councils** with involving diverse communities in their work efforts.

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